

PETITE SIRAH ISN'T PETITE

by Gordon Kendall

The law of unintended consequences occurs occasionally in the history of wine. Consider the case of French botanist Francois Durif, who in the 1870s was on a quest to develop a red grape that was resistant to powdery mildew.

In a process known as crossing, he pollinated the Rhone varietal peloursin with syrah. Durif named the resulting varietal after himself, but attempts to produce wine from this obscure grape left a lot to be desired in the flavor department, although the wines were full bodied and had a dense and saturated color. In addition, the grapes were prone to gray rot if the vines were subjected to a humid growing season. The grape fell out of favor in the Rhone Valley, as the sturdier grenache, syrah and carignan became the primary choices of vintners.

From the late 1870s, grape growers planting rootstock in California sought out Rhone varietals from France to produce their generic "Burgundy." They were looking for something with deep color and lots of concentration. They sought out "petite sirah" (clones of syrah with tight clusters of small black grapes), and often they wound up with Durif as well as syrah, Alicante bouschet, and other assorted grape varieties. California vineyards around Mendocino were planted with mixtures of whatever cuttings the growers brought back from France, and the resulting wine was often a "field blend," made by tossing different types of grapes in the lugs when they were picked.

By 1900, petite sirah had become a popular variety in California, and when Prohibition put wine production on the skids in 1913, many home winemakers employed the varietal. Even today, vineyards considered as petite sirah often contain an assortment of varieties.

Over time, acres planted to petite sirah diminished as vintners turned to other varieties for their blends. In 1964, Concannon Vineyards released the first wine labeled as petite sirah using juice from their 1961 vintage. Eventually, other winemakers such as Foppiano and Stags Leap began producing petite sirah.

The variety, known for its deep color and tannic backbone, was often added to blowsy, fruity zinfandel to create a more substantial wine. Most tasters cannot distinguish between a petite sirah and a syrah even though they are genetically different grapes. The wines have a dense, inky, dark color and are very full bodied with chewy or even ferocious tannins.

Petite sirah usually has aromas and flavors of black fruit, cherries, spice, pepper, chocolate and even dark tobacco. The wine's tannic backbone enables some examples to age gracefully for 10 years or more and often improve with age. Petite sirah pairs well with leg of lamb, mushrooms, rich cheeses, sausages and even dark chocolate. I once paired it with meat loaf, and it complemented the savory flavors of the meat and the thick tomato sauce.

Acres planted to the vine in California had declined to 2,500 in 1995, but have been on the rebound since then. The vines that produce this wine are some of the oldest in California and have survived world wars, Prohibition and the Depression. Petite sirah is also cultivated in South Africa and Australia where it can also be labeled as Durif.

Readers who enjoy a bold taste should give this robust red wine a try, but don't expect the style to be petite.

